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**Book Review: Tang, E. (2015). Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 234 pp. ISBN: 978-1439911655**

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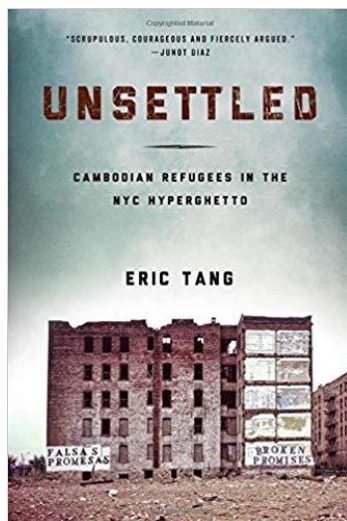
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**Book Review:** Tang, E. (2015). *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 234 pp. ISBN: 978-1439911655

Reviewed by  
**Sovicheth Boun**  
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“How many times in one lifetime can you be displaced?”

—Mia-lia Boua Kiernan, founder of [1Love Movement](http://1LoveMovement.org).

That many Southeast Asian refugee families in the U.S. have been struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder and vulnerable to poverty, racism, crime, and violence is not an untold reality (Lam, 2015; Um, 2015). Over the past few decades, a myriad of memoirs, anthologies, and scholarly literature have documented such a reality, with many depicting a transition timeline from refugee to immigrant, to permanent resident to citizen, and portraying each phase as supposedly bringing greater stability (see, e.g., Bui, 2017; Chan, 2004, 2015; Tenhula, 1991). However, as Eric Tang (2015) vividly elucidates in *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto*, “the cycle of uprooting, displacement, and captivity that defines the refugee experience persists long after resettlement”

(p. 5). Based on an ethnographic study that draws on his decade-long notes from his years as a community organizer in the Northwest Bronx and his extensive interviews with a key informant, named Pronh Ra, from 2009 to 2012 and again in 2014, Tang problematizes the political-judicial construction of the term *refugee* and “the assumed inevitability of refugee crossing, transfiguration, and settlement” (p. 5). He instead engages in the ideological and discursive deconstruction of the term, exposing the forms of power—a colonial and imperial project—that are reinforced and perpetuated through the “refugee” label. In other words, *Unsettled* provides a lucid account of how Cambodian refugees have been lauded as a solution to both the bad war in Southeast Asia and the veritable war against the poorest residents in contemporary urban America—the so-called *hyperghetto*.

Moreover, *Unsettled* troubles the portrayal of refugees’ enduring trials and tribulations of resettlement that, many have argued, lead up to redemption, and instead asserts “that refuge is never found, that discourses on rescue mask a more profound urban reality characterized by racialized geographic enclosure, displacement from formal labor markets, unrelenting poverty, and



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the criminalization of daily life” (p. 5). In essence, Tang repudiates the terms of resettlement that necessitate the fact that the displaced have entered a new, fulfilling life chapter—that is, they have found refuge. Throughout *Unsettled*, which spans an introduction, six chapters and a conclusion, Tang engages in a critical refugee studies project that seeks to explain the “refugee resettlement in the hyperghetto as a continuation of a long history of warfare” and how the life experiences of the refugees in the United States “defied dominant narratives of refugee resettlement as deliverance and redemption” (p. 21).

*Unsettled* opens with an introduction that discusses the historical context of the genocide in Cambodia in which Ra’s experience is situated and which leads to her resettlement—or as Tang argues, her long history of displacement and captivity. Moreover, before describing his ethnographic methodology, Tang elucidates two key concepts—*hyperghetto* and *convergence*—that underpin his research. Viewed as a site of captivity, the hyperghetto reflects the intensification of intractable inner city problems and is “reserved for the isolation and enclosure of the poorest urban residents who are no longer regarded as those to be recruited and disciplined into the lowest rungs of the workforce; rather they are seen as subjects to be warehoused” (p. 10). Tang argues that the presence of Cambodian refugees in the hyperghetto, mediated through refugee exceptionalism—“the ideologies and discursive practices that figure refugees as necessarily *in* the hyperghetto but never *of* it” (p. 14)—portrays the *convergence* of two distinct but relational genealogies of white supremacist governance: colonialism and slavery.

In Chapter One, *War/Time*, Tang discusses the connections between the refugee’s life as a subject of imperialist warfare and her life as a subject of the hyperghetto. Drawing on Ra’s experiences under the genocidal regime, Tang showed how the United States’ role during the U.S. War in Vietnam has led to the rise of the Khmer Rouge—the genocidal regime. Yet, by casting the 1980 Refugee Act as a global freedom project, the U.S. positioned itself as the champion of displaced Cambodians, and the refugees as rescued victims of an unending war. Such portrayal of the refugees not only masks ongoing U.S. imperial ambitions, but also enables the expansion of what some have termed *liberal warfare*—“war carried out in the name of delivering human rights and freedom” (p. 42). Tang proposes that Ra’s experiences—her movement from the war zone to the Thai camps and eventually to the Bronx hyperghetto—not be viewed as moments of transition and transfiguration, but as one long and broken state of captivity or what Tang terms *refugee temporality*—the refugee’s knowledge that her present quandaries are a reinscription of her past captivities. Refugee temporality not only helps to explain Ra’s understanding of the nature of ongoing warfare, but also challenges those who subscribe to the transfigurative power of crossing the border.

Chapter Two, *Housed in the Hyperghetto*, describes the continuity between past and present warfares, whereby the Bronx hyperghetto is cast as the new site of liberal warfare from which Cambodian refugees were to be saved. Tang discusses the origins of the hyperghetto dating back to the Black insurrections of the late 1960s and the Bronx arsons of the 1970s, which made Bronx “the national symbol of urban decline” (p. 57). Drawing on the recollections of housing organizer Blanca Ramirez, Tang illustrates how such warfare continues to play out in the dilapidated housing conditions and housing displacements to which Ra and other Cambodia refugees were subjected. Notwithstanding their hardships and poverty, Cambodia refugees were cast in contrast to the underclass life characteristic of Black urban residents, particularly those of the hyperghetto. Yet, with their high welfare participation and unemployment rates, the Cambodian refugees, along with Laotians and Hmongs, were cast out of the model-minority category—the status afforded to other Asians such as the Chinese, the Japanese, and Koreans, who

achieved economic success despite having arrived penniless in the U.S. In this sense, Tang argues, the Cambodian refugees were subjected to what he terms *refugee exceptionalism*, that is, “a process whereby refugees were rendered as those necessarily *in* but never *of* the hyperghetto” (p. 66). In other words, they were considered temporary residents of the hyperghetto or those who, even decades after resettlement, were only passing through.

In Chapter Three, *Welfare Resistance*, Tang unravels the punitive nature of the U.S. welfare state, not least the Bronx welfare bureaucracy and arbitrary rules that governed the lives of Ra and other Cambodian refugees. Specifically, the chapter focuses on the notion of welfare rights as understood by the Cambodian refugees and the passage of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, a welfare regulation that sets a time limit on cash assistance, requires mandatory workfare, excludes noncitizens from key programs, and toughens up verification requirements. Despite being lauded as a welfare reform, the broad and arbitrary provisions of the law constituted a culture of sanctions that defines the city’s welfare regime. However, for Ra and other Cambodian refugees, this predicament is not something new, but a continuation of a previous form of entrapment “in the ongoing cycle of rupture, displacement and confinement that characterized her unclosed sojourn” (p. 93). In what follows in Chapter Four, *Workfare Encampments*, Tang discusses how the workfare program was experienced by Kun Thea, a Cambodian refugee mother and widow who worked 30 hours per week as a sanitation crew in exchange for her monthly welfare check. Kun Thea’s experience helps to explain the notion of *welfare trap*, defined as “the phenomenon of welfare recipient caught between the vagaries of the unskilled-labor market and an inflexible welfare bureaucracy” (pp. 99-100). Many welfare recipients often refused to work for fear of being removed from the welfare rolls, if they “*overearn*” (p. 99). Kun Thea, however, appeared to readily succumb to the entrapment to which she was subjected, and thus chose to keep both her workfare and factory work, “recognizing that neither would ever be capable of pulling her out of poverty” (p. 100).

Chapter Five, *Sweatshops of the Neoplantation*, focuses on the survival tactic of the Cambodian refugee as an alternative form of resistance. In particular, it explores Ra’s experience as a low-wage homemaker in the home-based garment industry or what Tang describes as her “apartment sweatshop” (p. 115). By examining this particular form of labor, Tang calls into question the idea that the global assembly line is only taken up by the immigrant ethnic economy (e.g. Chinatowns), where ethnic business owners exploit the labors of mostly undocumented immigrant workers. Rather, as Ra’s experience shows, the hyperghetto was in fact globally integrated, and such transnational capitalism’s crude production processes “are indeed inscribed in what has been termed the ‘neoplantation’—a terrain of liberal warfare, rooted in U.S. slavery, that has always been central to the global economy” (p. 116). In Chapter Six, *Motherhood*, Tang traces the unbroken line of gendered violence that accounts for Ra’s ongoing captivity from Southeast Asia to the Bronx. This violence took many forms, including forced marriage, a felony charge for defending her daughter, run-ins with the child welfare agency, and an eviction from her home. In light of Ra’s experience, Tang demonstrates how the gendered violence against Cambodian refugee women bore a resemblance to that of poor Black women’s lives in the hyperghetto. However, such violence was not attributed to the matriarchal troupe that shaped the poor Black women’s experience, but to the discourse of refugee exceptionalism that cast the Cambodian refugees as foreign and deserving subjects—the exception—to be saved by liberalism, especially by liberal feminism. In the *Conclusion: Unsettled*, Tang discusses Ra’s resilience and the pursuit of the possibility of future redemption. Despite her incessant spatial and temporal movements, Ra resisted stasis or “the terms of a false resettlement, of a premature resolution to

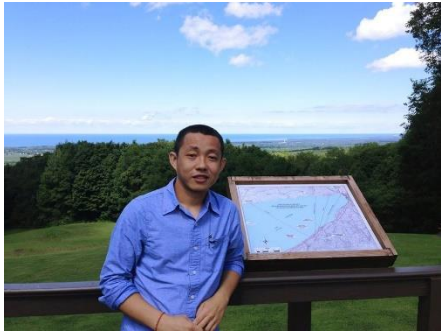
her long sojourn” (p. 162). Rather, she used movement as a strategy to defy her final captivity. Tang concludes the chapter by discussing Ra’s children’s adoption of their mother’s penchant for movement—for anticipating the dangers that lay ahead—and the next phase of refugee resistance movement among the younger generation—the “activism that draws on and extends the resiliency of the first generation” (p. 179).

*Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the NYC Hyperghetto* is a well written and fiercely argued book about the relentless movements of the Cambodian refugee—her escape to Thailand, her migration through the refugee camps, her multiple Bronx displacements, and her maneuverings within welfare and work confines—and her ongoing search for freedom and redemption. An ethnographic, critical refugee studies project, *Unsettled* offers a compelling account of uprooting, captivity, and displacement, but also of struggle, survival and resistance. Tang’s brilliant juxtaposition of the racialized and gendered violence experienced by the Cambodia refugee women and the poor Black urban women makes *Unsettled* a welcome scholarly text for those interested in the intersectionality of race, ethnicity and gender. Nonetheless, *Unsettled* is not a text about the supposed transition from struggling refugees to redemptive U.S. citizens. Rather, it brings to light the U.S.’s colonial and imperial project that placed the Cambodian refugees in perpetual captivities and displacements through the so-called *liberal warfare* while justifying their racialized and gendered violence against the deserving underclass—the poor Black urban inhabitants—of the hyperghetto.

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**Dr. Sovicheth Boun** is Assistant Professor of ESL and Literacy at Salem State University. His research interests include bi-/multilingual education, ESL/EFL, language ideologies, language teacher identities, language and educational experiences of Southeast Asian Americans students, and critical discourse analysis. His most recent book is the *Handbook of Bilingual and Multilingual Education*, co-edited with Wayne E. Wright and Ofelia Garcia and published by Wiley-Blackwell (2015).



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